

Deal ensures Guam jobs will go to U.S. workers

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WASHINGTON — Congressional negotiators reached agreement yesterday on legislation that would ensure that many of the jobs created on Guam by the transfer of Marines to the island will go to American workers from Hawai'i and the Mainland.

The 2010 defense authorization bill contains provisions by Rep. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawai'i, that would strip away some incentives for bringing foreign workers to Guam, while establishing greater federal oversight of the massive project there.

The transfer of 8,000 Marines and their estimated 9,000 family members from Okinawa, Japan, to Guam is scheduled to begin next year, with work on infrastructure. It is estimated that it will cost at least \$15 billion and is expected to generate thousands of jobs and scores of large contracts, some, potentially, for companies and workers in Hawai'i.

Abercrombie, who is running for governor, said he feared foreign companies would underbid American firms for much of the work and flood Guam with underpaid foreign labor, while construction workers on Hawai'i and the Mainland languished.

"This (bill) puts some genuine competition back into play," said Abercrombie, a senior member of the Armed Services Committee. "This makes sure the Marines and their families can count on the quality of the housing they'll be moving into. Feudal exploitation is on the way out."

Lawmakers are scheduled to pass the legislation this week. It would authorize almost \$700 billion in defense spending.

Abercrombie's Guam provisions in the bill would:

- Require that contractors advertise for and recruit American workers before foreign workers can be hired.
- Give the Labor Department broad oversight authority over contractors.
- Require that Guam's prevailing wages be reassessed and, if necessary, adjusted so they're more aligned with Mainland pay. This would discourage importing foreign workers.

Criticism in Press

Abercrombie has been faulted in the press by critics who say his defense bill amendments kowtow to Hawai'i labor organizations.

And Delegate Madeleine Bordallo, D-Guam, who sits on the Armed Services Committee with Abercrombie, has raised concerns that some of his defense provisions could delay or endanger the Marine relocation by radically raising construction costs.

The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that some of Abercrombie's initial proposals would have inflated the cost of the move by \$10 billion.

But Bordallo said yesterday that she was satisfied with the labor compromises she reached with Abercrombie.

"The Congress is clear in its support for the military buildup on Guam," she said. "We do have a provision that requires contractors to be diligent and ensure that reasonable efforts are taken to hire U.S. workers."

Abercrombie defended his work yesterday, saying he's been concerned about working conditions on Guam, starting several years ago as the Pentagon began developing plans to move the Marines there.

"I've been on this long before I ever thought about running for governor," he said.

Abercrombie Happy

Abercrombie said he was extremely happy with the outcome of the defense bill yesterday, even though much of his original language was changed.

For example, one measure would have required that 70 percent of the construction jobs be given to American workers and that they be paid wages comparable to those in Hawai'i, which are almost twice as high as Guam's.

That didn't make it, but Abercrombie said it was simply a starting point for wage negotiations.

"Some of my original proposals were just markers," he said. "In the end, I could not be happier about the outcome."

The Japanese government has been under intense political pressure to get the Marines off Okinawa since 1995, when three U.S. servicemen stationed there raped a 12-year-old girl, straining U.S.-Japanese relations.

The U.S. has about 50,000 military personnel in Japan.